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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalization, Malaysia's ability to remain economically competitive depends on the skills of its workforce. The policies and practices of Malaysia's vocational education system must be revised to do more to give the country's disabled citizens the training they need to find employment and become taxpayers. More concerted efforts are needed to uphold the rights of Malaysia's estimated 100,000 disabled adults, only 4,175 of whom were employed in the private sector in 1990-2001. Appropriate legislation is needed to defend the rights of special populations as outlined by United Nations resolution 3447 (Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons). These rights include the right to economic and social security, the right to a decent standard of living, and the right to have their special needs considered at all stages of economic and social planning. Malaysia needs a holistic and systematic approach to improving the quality of life of its special needs population. The following legislative acts must be passed: (1) the Vocational Education and Training for Special Need Population Act; (2) the Job Partnership and Employment for Disabled Act; and (3) the Building Accessibility Act. The Vocational Education and Training for Special Need Population Act should emphasize making vocational education and training accessible to everyone and eliminating gender bias and stereotyping. (MN)

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Abstract

Minimal number of disabled being employed reflects the deficiency in the system whereby no specific Act that mandates the employers to employ special population in Malaysia. The critical issues facing special population include the absence of specific Act to sustain employers' commitment to provide job opportunities to special needs population; lack of coherent interagency collaboration and coordination in handling the education, training, and job placement for the disabled; negative image of special population and they seem to be "segregated" from the mainstream; lack of career counseling for the disabled and their parents; inadequate training of vocational special needs teachers; and relatively weak advocate groups for people with disabilities. In the era of globalization and k-economy, the future of Malaysia's competitiveness depends on the skills of its workforce. Special population should be an asset to the country, not a liability. If trained properly and given job opportunities, it is not impossible that people with disabilities can be employed and become taxpayers. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to review the supportive and suppressive factors in the improvement of vocational special needs education in Malaysia. Several suggestions for policy and practice will be offered.

Introduction

The job awareness campaigns for the disabled and the proposed codes of practice to make the workplace more disabled-friendly by the Ministry of Human Resources deserved an applause. It is timely that society and employers aware of the importance of economic independence for the special population. There has been some encouraging progress in enhancing job opportunities for people with disabilities in Malaysia. In civil service, one percent employment quota for the disabled has been gazetted since 1988 (Pekeliling Perkhidmatan Bil. 10 Tahun 1988). More technical and vocational schools are open to special needs learners. Government agencies and NGOs have been involved in training and placing handicapped individuals in the private sector. Manpower department in the Ministry of Human Resources has implemented placement program for

the disabled since 1990. Several companies including Multi-National companies have hired people with disabilities.

The Rights of Special Population

More concerted effort needs to be organized to uphold the rights of special population. According to Manpower Department, 4,175 disabled persons have been employed in private sector from 1990 – June 2001 (Table 1). Conservative estimate shows that there are about 100,000 adults with disabilities in this country (New Straits Times, June 2, 2001). So, within the period of 11 years, there is about four percent of special needs individuals employed by the private sector in Malaysia. World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 10 percent of world population suffers some sort of disabilities from light to severe cases.

Table 1. Job Placement of Special Needs Individuals in Private Sector 1990 until June 2001

Disability	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	June 2001	Total
Blind	71	117	48	113	40	79	33	22	32	30	24	18	627
Deaf	94	166	154	184	165	122	99	196	59	86	119	49	1493
Physical	19	63	152	249	253	269	136	181	121	140	101	112	1796
Mental	2	3	7	31	22	30	80	30	9	15	20	10	259
Total	186	349	361	577	480	500	348	429	221	271	264	189	4175

(Source: Manpower Division, Ministry of Human Resources, 2001)

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Minimal number of disabled being employed reflects the deficiency in our system whereby no specific act that mandates the employers to employ special population. Appropriate act is needed to defend the rights of special population as outlined by the United Nations resolution 3447 which include:

- Disabled persons have the inherent right to respect for their human dignity. Disabled persons, whatever the origin, nature and seriousness of their handicaps and disabilities, have the same fundamental rights as their fellow-citizens of the same age, which implies first and foremost the right to enjoy a decent life, as normal and full as possible.

- Disabled persons have the same civil and political rights as other human beings.

- Disabled persons are entitled to the measures designed to enable them to become as self-reliant as possible.

- Disabled persons have the right to medical, psychological and functional treatment, including prosthetic and orthetic appliances, to medical and social rehabilitation, education, vocational training and rehabilitation, aid, counseling, placement services and other services which will enable them to develop their capabilities and skills to the maximum and will hasten the processes of their social integration or reintegration.

- Disabled persons have the right to economic and social security and to a decent level of living. They have the right, according to their capabilities, to secure and retain employment or to engage in a useful, productive and remunerative occupation and to join trade unions.

- Disabled persons are entitled to have their special needs taken into consideration at all stages of economic and social planning.

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- Disabled persons shall be protected against all exploitation, all regulations and all treatment of a discriminatory, abusive or degrading nature.

- Disabled persons shall be able to avail themselves of qualified legal aid when such aid proves indispensable for the protection of their persons and property. If judicial proceedings are instituted against them, the legal procedure applied shall take their physical and mental condition fully into account.

The critical issues facing special population include the absence of specific act to sustain employers' commitment to provide job opportunities to special needs population; lack of coherent interagency collaboration and coordination in handling the education, training, and job placement for the disabled; negative image of special population and they seem to be "segregated" from the mainstream; lack of career counseling for the disabled and their parents; inadequate training of vocational special needs teachers; and relatively weak advocate groups for people with disabilities.

Suggestions for policy and practice

What we need is a holistic and systematic approach to improve the life quality of our special needs population. Several new acts and enactments should be put in place. The authors suggest at least three new acts should be introduced, i.e., Vocational Education and Training for Special Need Population Act, Job Partnership and Employment for Disabled Act, and Building Accessibility Act.

First, the proposed Vocational Education for Special Need Population Act should address the issues of accessibility and discrimination. The act should emphasize on making vocational education and training accessible to all persons, including handicapped, disadvantaged, at-risk, youth and adults in need of training and retraining. Vocational program should be designed to eliminate gender bias and stereotyping. Article 12 of the Federal Constitution should be extended to include no discrimination against people with disabilities.

The proposed act should also focus on improving the quality of vocational programs in order to provide the nation's workforce the marketable skills needed to improve productivity and promote economic growth. In 2001 bugdet, government has allocated 29.8 million Ringgit to build more Vocational Special Needs Schools. But the focus is on the blind, deaf, and learning disabled (LD). To be comprehensive, the schools should open up to other categories such as gifted, at-risk, disadvantaged, those with physical, educatable mental, and emotional disabilities.

Second, the proposed Job Partnership and Employment for Disabled Act is aimed at establishing systemic partnership between public and private sectors in training and hiring the special individuals. This act should provide mandates, incentives and guidelines for the partnership. For instance, the act should specify (a) partnership guidelines (b) basic vocational training (c) on-the-job training (d) support services (e) job-searching services (f) job placement services, and (g) follow-up services.

In term of employment, so far, there is no specific act or law that mandates the private employers to hire special needs individuals. Therefore, the need to mandate employers to employ special individuals has never been more critical. In the United States, for example, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 503 states: "Any employer receiving federal assistance in the form of contracts for $2,500 or more is required to develop an affirmative action plan to recruit, hire, train, and advance in employment handicapped individual ... The plan must be reviewed and updated once a year" (Sarkees & Scott, 1986, p.8).

Section 503 also requires that employers make a "reasonable accommodation" for handicapped workers. This means that specific changes must be made to the work environment to accommodate the needs of the special workers. These changes may require, for instance, that a ramp be built or a worktable be lowered or that a blind employee be provided with appropriate accessories. The requirement does not mean that

an employer must assume a large financial hardship. Government funds should be made available to help employers make appropriate changes to the building or the work site.

For a start, besides the tax incentives, the proposed act may specify that the large companies (for instance, the companies that have more than 500 employees) are required to reserve and fill the minimum one percent quota of the whole workforce for the special individuals. And also there should be no discrimination on the workplace based on disabilities.

Third, the proposed Building Accessibility Act is aimed at facilitating handicapped individuals to get access into buildings. Any hindrance for the disabled to get access into a building is seen as a violation of his or her right to live as other fellow citizens. Thus, this act may require all public buildings and new building be made accessible for handicapped persons and that a system of monitoring be established to ensure compliance.

Conclusion

Work is an important part of life. It provides a sense of recognition and self-respect for all people including the disabled (Sarkees & Scott, 1986). In the era of k-economy, what is count is intellectual capacity and competency rather than physical disabilities. Human capital theory asserts that investment in education and training is essential to achieve social and economic progress. Special population should be an asset to the country, not a liability. If trained properly and given job opportunities, it is not impossible that people with disabilities can be employed and become taxpayers. Included in special population are gifted students with extraordinary talents. If these talents are nurtured from an early age, they can contribute to the nation building. With knowledge playing a dominant role, education and training is indispensable. Education and job opportunities for the special needs individuals should be open as wide as possible. New Act that mandates the employers to hire individuals with disabilities should be put in place. In addition to the traditional careers for people with disabilities such as, telephone operators, crafters, tailors, waiters, masseurs, assemblers; we should

also train special population for nontraditional career pathways such as IT professionals, accountants, economists, stockbrokers, teachers, technicians, software developers, system analysts, entrepreneurs, inventors, and technoprenuers. If the society and employers are ready to open up more educational and job opportunities to the disabled, then the true spirit of caring society will be realized.

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